NALINI MALANI:
MYTHOLOGY, MEMORY, AND MULTIPLICITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

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Abstract

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In 2018, contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani had two major solo exhibitions in Europe—notable given that late in life, her deeply culturally specific artwork was receiving a mainstream European audience. In a South Asian cultural landscape disrupted and complicated by its recent colonial past, Malani has emerged as a figure who radically encapsulates many of the concerns of India's present-day art production. This thesis investigates Malani's appropriation of the mythological heroine Sita in her artwork, through which she comments on the treatment of contemporary Indian women. Through the evolution of her depictions of women like Sita, Malani's artwork acts as a defiant rebuke of fundamentalism while also speaking in a shared visual language drawing heavily from past tradition, iconography, and narrative. Ultimately, Malani's work fills an important gap in the Indian national consciousness by serving as an exercise in remembrance, in reclaiming agency, and in raising awareness of the female trauma that has been intertwined and conflated with the project of nation building.

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This thesis is dedicated to the strong women who raised me and to victims of sexual assault in India and elsewhere.

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Introduction

In 2018, following a career spanning nearly fifty years, the contemporary Indian artist Nalini Malani had two major solo exhibitions in Europe. This was exceptional for a number of reasons. Prior to the 1990s, contemporary Indian art had struggled to gain a footing in the international art world. Much of modern Indian art was not taken seriously as its reference of Western art was regarded as derivative and inauthentic—dubbed the "Picasso manqué syndrome" for how the citation of non-Western art by European modernists was viewed as original and radical even as the influence of Western art on artists from other parts of the world was called imitative.[1] However, economic reform in India and newfound interest in modernisms outside the West led to an explosion of attention. By some estimates, the Indian art market grew in value from $2 million in 2001 to $400 million in 2008, accompanied by museum exhibitions and much scholarly interest in the field.[2]

At the center of this boom is Malani, who now in her 70s, was one of the earliest practitioners of contemporary Indian art. When I first saw her exhibition in the small town of Rivoli, Italy, where it had traveled from a retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, I was struck by how an Indian woman artist like Malani had not only earned a prestigious two-part retrospective but had done so through radical depictions of Hindu religious imagery—encapsulating and representing on an international scale the concerns of India's present-day art production, even as contemporaries were censored, threatened, and exiled for doing the same just a few decades earlier (fig. 1).

[1] Sonal Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 13.
[2] Ibid, 6.

This thesis focuses on a unique theme within Malani's work—her representations of the Hindu goddess Sita—to argue how these depictions question the treatment of contemporary Indian women as well as confront attempts by fundamentalists in India to dictate the image of correct religious behavior. Religious subjects are common in Indian art but uniquely, Malani is the only contemporary Indian artist who has focused on Sita in repeated depiction for more than a decade. Although not discussed in scholarship on Malani, I believe that this aspect of her practice is extremely significant. While in recent years, Hindu nationalists have used traditional figures like Sita to advance their aims, Malani stands out for her oppositional practice; she instead appropriates "tradition" to reclaim and return India's sense of multiplicity and multivalence, and restore to the theme of Sita some of complex significance.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

Chapter 1 provides an overview of Indian art's relationship to modernity and tradition given its colonial past, locating Malani's attitudes towards indigenous imagery within developments in the art world. It then contextualizes the human conflict that frames Malani's work, first touching on the violence intertwined with the birth of the Indian state during Partition and then highlighting the sectarian violence that continues to plague the country. Chapter 2 underscores the *Ramayana*'s influence and reception in the present day, explaining the wide political, religious, and artistic reach of the epic and how perceptions of Sita as the ideal woman continue to affect gender relations in India. Chapter 3 analyzes Malani's subversion of traditional depictions of Sita in order to address the violence that has been enacted against women and considers how Sita fits into Malani's larger practice. Finally, Chapter 4 ends with some considerations on how globalism might affect the future of contemporary Indian art.

Chapter 1 – Contextualizing Tradition

Among many changes that took place in India in the 20th century was the growing number of Indian artists who practice in the modern form. The modern idea of an artist as someone who creates fine art for the purpose of expression, in contrast to a skilled craftsperson following the requests of a patron, is itself a recent conception even in the West. While India is a country well known for its rich artistic traditions, artists of the past were operating in a different mode than modern artists, which is an important distinction when considering modern Indian art's connection to the past.

Malani's use of traditional Indian imagery in her artwork is significant given the complicated relationship between tradition and modernity in decolonized countries like India. In her text "Detours from the Contemporary," Indian art scholar Geeta Kapur describes terms such as tradition and modernity as "largely pragmatic features of nation-building," used by formerly colonized countries to construct identity within the cultural polemic of decolonization.[3] Tradition, then, is "a signifier drawing energy from an imaginary resource—the ideal tradition."[4] When historicized, both tradition and modernity can "notate a radical purpose in the cultural politics of the third world."[5] Tradition carries the power of resistance in a colonial context and in fact, much of the present conception of tradition in India was set forth by nineteenth century nationalists as a means of resisting imperialism—memorably illustrated by Gandhi. However, the ideology of nationalism, by its very definition of promoting the interests of a certain nation or group over others, can also be used as justification for the oppression of minorities and has

[3] Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 267.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

historically empowered fascist movements. In a relatively young and newly democratic country like India, modernity and tradition remain in constant dialogue.

Indian artists' relationships to these concepts have evolved over time, with preferences for traditional versus modern modes of representation shifting many times throughout India's colonial art history to the present. This tension manifested in the form of "Eastern" and "Western" influence in Indian art, categories that represented modes of thought rather than geographical entities. The dichotomy between East and West was constructed and reinforced by British colonialism, which associated Eastern art with the village, crafts, tradition, and nationalism while the West was tied to the city, fine art, modernity, and colonialism.[6] European thinkers of the time dismissed the Indian tradition's focus on the decorative arts as culturally inferior, while Indian scholars defended the crafts tradition as spiritual, mystical, and collective in contrast to what they viewed as the materialistic and individualistic art of the West.[7] Ultimately, these reductive divisions simplify the reality of a complex, transnational exchange of ideas between the two cultures. Indian artists neither completely disavowed artistic practices in the West, nor simply modified Western forms into an Indian context.[8]

While modern Indian art in the decades after independence was preoccupied with investigating its relationship to the new Indian nation state, postmodern contemporary Indian art "[questions] the validity of a nation-centered concept of culture and identity" entirely.[9] Indian modernism as an artistic movement included an association between modernity and economic and technical development, yearning for the progress that was disrupted by colonialism. Many Indian artists today, including Malani, reject that view and instead remember the nation as the

[6] Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 13.
[7] Ibid, 12.
[8] Ibid, 14.
[9] R. Siva Kumar, "Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview," *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (1999): 21, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1999.10791949.

failings and schisms that caused a generation of suffering. She belongs to a group of artists who during the 1980s revived figurative representation in Indian art—which had undergone a period of abstraction—in order to renegotiate traditional imagery. By including diverse art historical references and intertextual images, they sought to disrupt national tradition and reveal its parodic potential. These artists' use of figuration, narrative, and political references defied earlier abstract, ahistorical modes of representation, while also rejecting the romanticizing of indigenous tradition that has been used in the past to serve reactionary politics.[10]

Malani's relationship to past Indian artistic practices is exemplified her 2003 installation and video work *Unity in Diversity* (fig. 2). Her video references and subverts a painting by the nineteenth century artist Raja Ravi Varma, who is famous for depicting Indian subjects using European academic techniques. Varma's romanticized depictions of Hindu deities in particular epitomize the earlier era of Indian art that idealized tradition and nationalism, such that his works continue to be reproduced, circulated, and politicized to this end. In *Unity in Diversity*, Malani recreates a scene from Varma's *Galaxy of Musicians* (1889) of different women playing music together in harmony, meant to represent India's ethnic diversity (fig. 3).[11] However, in Malani's video, the idyllic scene is interrupted by gunshots as the piece devolves into images of violence from both Partition and from communal riots in the state of Gujarat in 2002. Visceral images of abortion are layered over Varma's women, referencing the abduction, rape, and mutilation of scores of women during India's formation as a nation state and democracy. Through the piece, Malani evokes the failures of India's modernist project of nation-building by depicting the contrast between an ideal India, as presented by the government and past artists like Varma, and a violent reality, as experienced by Indian women including Malani herself.

[10] Mieke Bal, *In Medias Res: Inside Nalini Malani's Shadow Plays* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2016), 225.
[11] Macushla Robinson, "Nalini Malani: In the Shadow of Partition," *Art Monthly Australasia*, no. 256 (Summer 2012/2013): 40, EBSCOhost.

POLITICAL HISTORY

In addition to considering developments in India's art world, Malani's interventions should be framed in terms of larger political events happening within the country. Specifically, her personal experiences of communal violence in India inform the thesis of her work, which is that violence and female trauma are cyclical conditions of the human experience.

Malani is just one of a larger group of contemporary Indian artists who engage with the past and with religion in their work. However, she is uniquely positioned to explore these issues because her own life experiences mirror the tragedy that became of India when in 1947, following Indian independence from British rule, colonial powers divided the subcontinent into the separate countries of India and Pakistan. The partition displaced over 14 million people along religious lines, created a massive refugee crisis, and left dead somewhere between several hundred thousand and two million people due to communal violence. Born in Karachi in 1946, the year before Partition, to a Sikh mother and a Christian father, Malani herself came to India as a refugee and minority.

The bloodshed of Partition was just the beginning of what would become a pervasive phenomenon of violence between Hindus and Muslims. Since 1950, violence between the two religious groups has claimed more than 10,000 lives in India.[12] A deeply entrenched cultural tension is responsible, which has existed since the colonial era when British rulers sought to divide the two communities in order to maintain power. One example is the rewriting of history textbooks to make Hindus feels that Muslim rulers had oppressed and humiliated them in the past, treating them unjustly and destroying their temples.[13] Distrust between India's Hindus and

[12] Raheel Dhattiwala and Michael Biggs, "The Political Logic of Ethnic Violence: The Anti-Muslim Pogrom in Gujarat, 2002," *Politics & Society* 40, no. 4 (December 2012): 484, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329212461125.
[13] Asghar Ali Engineer, "Gujarat Riots in the Light of the History of Communal Violence," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 50 (December 2002): 5047, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4412966.

Muslims is complex and stems from multiple sources, but these colonial-era ideas continue to be propagated today.

The living wound of Partition has always been the founding trauma and preoccupation of Malani's work,[14] but it has gained new urgency as sectarian violence has intensified within India in recent decades. While ethnic riots between Hindus and Muslims continue, the nature of the violence has fundamentally changed. The religious tension extent in the country since its traumatic founding has in the twenty-first century been weaponized by political forces in what has been described as a state-sponsored "pogrom" by the Hindu majority against ethnic minorities, often for political and electoral gain.[15]

Riots in the state of Gujarat in 2002 exemplify this difference. The Gujarat violence is significant for having the highest death toll of any incident of Hindu-Muslim violence in India's history as an independent state: approximately 1,000 people, predominantly Muslims, were killed in reaction to the death of 59 Hindu pilgrims on a train near Godhra, which was widely believed by Hindus to have been set on fire by a Muslim mob, but unproven.[16] Reactionary violence against Muslims throughout the state continued for the following four months, and then on and off for another six. The intensity of the violence, with approximately 500 people killed in just three days, has been described as "the worst event of Hindu-Muslim violence in the country" as such large-scale killings rarely occur in democracies outside of civil war.[17] The incident was also unique for spreading beyond urban areas to rural villages, where massacres of Muslims by villagers and neighbors were extensively reported.[18]

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[14] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Arjun Appadurai, and Andreas Huyssen, *Nalini Malani: In Search of Vanished Blood* (Berlin, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 5.
[15] Howard Spodek, "In the Hindutva Laboratory: Pogroms and Politics in Gujarat, 2002," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (March 2010): 352, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X08003612.
[16] Dhattiwala and Biggs, "The Political," 484.
[17] Ibid, 487.
[18] Ibid, 485.

What most set apart this new iteration of violence, however, was that police, under orders from the state's chief minister, did little to intervene in the attacks and even joined in.[19] In one high profile incident, mobs attacked and burned the Gulbarg Society, a Muslim neighborhood in Ahmedabad. Muslims had sought refuge at the home of former member of Parliament Ehsan Jafri, who called the police and many influential government officials for assistance over the course of several hours.[20] When no help arrived, sixty-nine people were killed including Jafri, who was dismembered alive and burned. Similar incidents across the state led the Gujarat riots to be labeled as a pogrom, or an assault by one group on other in which the government ignores or even supports the attackers. At the highest levels of government, officials did not act to put down the violence and even exacerbated the situation with public demonstrations and calls to protest.[21] The court system furthered the disparity in treatment by putting nearly 100 people on trial for the Godhra incident—many receiving life sentences or death sentences—while thousands of cases against Hindu rioters were dismissed for a lack of evidence.[22] Months later, Gujarat's chief minister Narendra Modi was reelected in a landslide victory after running a campaign based largely upon uniting Hindus and inciting fear against Muslims.[23] In 2014, he went on to become the country's prime minister—bringing Hindu nationalist ideology to a national scale.

Malani's artwork in particular draws heavily from the experiences of women during these incidents. As is often the case in sectarian violence, it is women who have been subjected to the worst of the horror. The sexual violence and torture enacted against women during these

[19] Spodek, "In the Hindutva," 352.
[20] Shreeya Sinha and Mark Suppes, "Timeline of the Riots in Modi's Gujarat," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/04/06/world/asia/modi-gujarat-riots-timeline.html#/#time287_8514.
[21] Spodek, "In the Hindutva," 356.
[22] Sinha and Suppes, "Timeline of the Riots."
[23] Ibid.

incidents has been discussed at great length, including by the Human Rights Watch.[24] It included the kidnapping, rape, and public humiliation of women by men of the opposite group in order to purportedly demean the men of the rival religion. It also, however, involved a second form of violence inflicted on women by their own family members, including honor killings or the insistence by men that their female relatives commit suicide in order to protect the purity of the community.[25] Both forms of violence illustrate how "women were not treated as humans but rather as markers of communal and national pride."[26]

RIGHTWING NATIONALISM

In India today, thought to be a root cause of political violence, nationalism has reemerged as a major political force in the form of rightwing Hindu fundamentalist groups. Although the roots of Hindu nationalism can be traced back to the British colonial era, the movement achieved prominence in the 1990s when its corresponding political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), gained power in Parliament.[27] The ideologies behind the movement had developed in parallel to the Congress Party during the 1920s, which followed principles articulated by Gandhi.[28] Gandhi conceived of India as a peaceful assortment of religious communities, each equal to one another. Hindu nationalism, in contrast, developed as an alternative political culture that rejected non-violence as an effective tool against the British.[29] It also repudiated Gandhi's universalist conception of India in favor of the view that the country was defined not by its plurality, but by its Hindu majority. This doctrine, which became known as Hindutva, is

[24] Human Rights Watch, *"WE HAVE NO ORDERS TO SAVE YOU" State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2002), 27-29.
[25] Arunima Dey, "Violence Against Women During the Partition of India: Interpreting Women and their Bodies in the Context of Ethnic Genocide," *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, no. 37 (2016): 104.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), x, digital file.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid, xi.

comparable to nationalistic movements in Europe and elsewhere similarly based in religious and racial similarity.

There is an increasing sense of urgency within India's art community to respond to the ideas propagated by these groups, some of which plainly advocate for discriminatory practices towards non-Hindu religious minorities. Whereas Indian artists in the past have used tradition and indigenous symbols as a strategy of nation building and constructing identity in decolonized India, Malani now embraces tradition in order to assert plurality and diversity. While Hindu nationalists have coopted traditional figures and stories to endorse their vision of an India defined by Hinduism, Malani's practice can be understood as using it to reclaim and return India's sense of multiplicity and multivalence. When approaching Malani's dense and life-size artworks, populated with mythological characters and symbols from antiquity, it is important to recognize their inspiration lies in the fate of real people.

Chapter 2 – The *Ramayana*'s Continued Cultural Relevancy

Unpacking Nalini Malani's depictions of Sita requires an understanding of the *Ramayana*'s lasting influence in present-day India and Sita's legacy within this tradition. Composed of some 24,000 verses in Sanskrit likely after the fourth century BCE, the *Ramayana* is one of India's great epic poems and recounts the story of the god Rama's royal birth and subsequent journeys—primarily the rescue of his kidnapped wife Sita. Although originally written thousands of years ago by the sage poet Valmiki, the ancient epic has been reinterpreted and retold countless times and in different geographic variations. In addition to providing a longstanding source of inspiration in art and literature, the *Ramayana* is treated as a didactic text within Hinduism and continues to serve as a guide to everyday conduct within the living religious tradition. Consequently, its omnipresence still influences contemporary Indian society.

Given that the *Ramayana* has long been politicized, from twelfth century kings legitimizing their rule through comparisons to Rama to Gandhi referencing Sita when encouraging women to join the resistance against British rule,[30, 31] its latest invocation as a mobilization tactic by nationalist groups is perhaps as unsurprising as it is indicative of the epic's potency within the national imagination. The Hindu nationalist movement has singled out Rama as its primary deity and the symbolic center of Hindu India. Given Rama's worldly birth and his interventionist goal to better mankind, he serves well the Hindutva rhetoric of returning to a traditional India, as in the days of "Ram-Rajya" or utopia under Ram's rule.[32]

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[30] Sheldon Pollock, "Ramayana and Political Imagination in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 266, https://doi.org/10.2307/2059648.
[31] Rashmi Luthra, "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics," *Feminist Formations* 26, no. 2 (2014): 136, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2014.0021.
[32] Richard H. Davis, "The Cultural Background of Hindutva," in *India Briefing: Takeoff at Last?*, ed. Alyssa Ayres and Philip Oldenburg (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 124-125.

An impetus to the renewed interest in Rama came in 1987 when India's government-run national television network aired a dramatized version of the *Ramayana*, directed by Ramanand Sagar, which became the most popular show ever aired on Indian television. Millions of Indians tuned in to watch each installment, uniting huge portions of the diverse population in what became an unprecedented cultural phenomenon. Newspaper accounts from the time give vivid accounts of bustling streets abandoned, weddings and funerals delayed, and even train schedules altered due to the masses of people watching broadcasts of the "Ramayan" serial.[33] Most striking are reports of the religious phenomenon of viewers praying to the on-screen Rama, adorning their television sets with garlands "as if television offered a new medium for the mass realization of darshan (direct eye contact) with the deity."[34]

The "Ramayan" show also contributed to an increasingly simplified and homogenous view of the *Ramayana* within India, which reinforced the Hindu nationalist vision of Rama. Rama is a complex figure who has been represented and reinterpreted in different iterations throughout history, reenacted in every Indian language. There is no singular or authoritative image of Rama, and yet historians have argued that an effect of the "Ramayan" dramatization was the "powerful dissemination of a single and seemingly comprehensive version of the story" which "[threatens] to homogenize the pluralistic tradition of multiple Rama narratives."[35] With an emphasis placed on his human characteristics, the "Ramayan" Rama is shown as having a normal complexion and two arms rather than possessing the blue skin and four arms typical of Hindu depictions of the divine, in line instead with the militant and masculine portrayal of Rama promoted by Hindutva groups in the past few decades (fig. 4). The memorable images of the "Ramayan" serial ultimately substantiated the Hindu nationalist view that Rama is not a

[33] Philip Lutgendorf, "Ramayan: The Video," *TDR (1988-)* 34, no. 2 (1990): 137, https://doi.org/10.2307/1146030.
[34] Davis, "The Cultural," 125.
[35] Ibid, 126.

legendary figure of mythology, but rather a divine figure who had taken a real human birth and ruled an actual kingdom. He has been endorsed "not just as an object of devotion, but more as a model and rallying point for Hindus in the modern world," meant to be identified with the contemporary Hindu community.[36]

The most tragic and revealing evidence of the *Ramayana*'s continued cultural relevancy, however, is the violence it has inspired in contemporary India. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 by fundamentalists is the most distinct and resonant of such recent incidents. The airing of the "Ramayan" show in 1987 coincided with a campaign begun three years earlier in 1984 by the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a religious Hindu nationalist group, seeking to reclaim the alleged site of Rama's birth in Ayodhya. Reviving debates about the hotly contested site, the group claimed that a Hindu temple that had marked Ram's birthplace for many centuries was destroyed in the sixteenth century by the Mughal emperor Babur, who had erected a mosque upon the ruins.[37] Following an eight-year campaign, the group took matters into their own hands in 1992 when mobs razed the mosque to the ground in Rama's name—resulting in nationwide rioting and violence between Hindus and Muslims that killed over 2,000 people.[38] Rhetoric idolizing Rama as the forefather of modern Hindus had in turn vilified Muslims, holding them accountable for the actions of past Islamic conquerors and exacerbating existing religious tensions. Ultimately, the events surrounding the Babri Masjid destruction revealed the full extent and urgency of how rhetoric surrounding the *Ramayana* has affected the lives of real people in India and continues to do so.

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[36] Ibid, 128.
[37] Richard H. Davis, "The Rise and Fall of a Sacred Place: Ayodhya over Three Decades," in *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies*, ed. Marc Howard Ross (n.p.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 29-30.
[38] "Timeline: Ayodhya holy site crisis," *BBC News*, December 6, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11436552.

SITA'S LEGACY AS THE IDEAL WOMAN

Another lasting impact of the *Ramayana* has been its effect on gender roles. In particular, the glorification of Sita as the ideal woman and wife continues to confer expectations onto Indian women about their behavior in society. The *Ramayana*, like other epics, is a moralizing tale of exemplars. The hero Rama's defeat over the villain Ravana represents the triumph of good over evil, illustrating how ego and greed lead to destruction and downfall. Rama is meant to epitomize the perfect man and thus his wife Sita is the perfect woman, with their relationship providing a model for marital relationships. In reality, depictions of Sita that emphasize her self-sacrificing nature can place unintended pressures on real women in India.

In the original Valmiki *Ramayana*, Sita is the wife of the deity Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu. When her husband is forced to leave his kingdom and spend fourteen years in exile, she dutifully accompanies him into the jungle. During this time, she is abducted by a demon king named Ravana. After her husband Rama rescues her, Sita is cruelly rejected by him as he believes she must have been involved in adultery after spending time in another man's home. Sita then endures a test where she is lit afire on a funerary pyre in order to prove her purity. Even after she survives unscathed with the blessing of the fire god Agni, Rama later renounces her nonetheless as he believes rumors regarding her chastity undermine his legitimacy as king. Rather than undergo another *agni pariksha*, or fire test, Sita essentially commits suicide by asking that the earth swallow her whole if she is truthful. While in the original story Sita is defiant and angry at this cruelty, over time later versions of the story silenced Sita and undermined Rama's shocking behavior for reasons of religious and political convenience.[39]

[39] Linda Hess, "Rejecting Sita: Indian Responses to the Ideal Man's Cruel Treatment of His Ideal Wife," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1999): 3, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1466031.

Throughout the story, Sita's description reinforces an Indian feminine ideal of self-sacrifice.[40] At every critical moment, she is deferential to her husband, putting his needs before her own. First, she insists on leaving the comforts of her royal life and following her husband into the jungle, arguing that a dutiful wife stays by her husband's side during hardships even as Rama attempts to deter her.[41] She also agrees to undergo the fire test in order to prove her innocence. In her final act, Sita chooses death in order to once again prove her truthfulness and devotion. Although this itself is an act of defiance, Sita still makes the ultimate sacrifice by giving up her life.

There continues to be enormous cultural pressure exerted on Indian women to live up to this standard. Sita has been cited as very popular mythical woman among Indians[42]—in contrast to other goddesses like Kali and Durga who represent power, the primary virtues Sita illustrates are self-sacrifice and role adherence. A myriad of factors affects the mores governing Indian women, but they are mediated by the same central cultural ideals that can be found in Sita's story—the expectation to be a good wife, daughter-in-law, and community member above all else. Although the story of the *Ramayana* is ancient, these ideals are echoed in everyday arenas such as in marital homes, religious rituals, and wedding ceremonies.[43] One clear example is the parallel between Sita's trial by fire and the imitative ritual of sati, a formerly widespread practice in which a widow immolated herself on her husband's funerary pyre. In a society where a woman's identity was constructed through her husband, his death would ideally result in her nonexistence, especially if her children were grown.[44] The widow's death would restore the

[40] Rashmi Goel, "Sita's Trousseau: Restorative Justice, Domestic Violence, and South Asian Culture," *Violence Against Women* 11, no. 5 (May 2005): 647, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801205274522.
[41] Ibid, 648.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, 655.
[44] Mahasveta Barua, "Television, Politics, and the Epic Heroine: Case Study, Sita," in *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, ed. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva, Asian American History and Culture (n.p.: Temple University Press, 1996), 226.

balance and erase the misfortune she carried, which was why she would be later celebrated as a sati for her devotion. Sacralizing Sita's death and later victims of sati reflects a belief that the "very act of ceasing to exist elevates them" and that Indian society glorifies "the essential quality of stoic submissiveness, of women's minimizing their own existence" as not only desirable, but venerable.[45]

Modern Indian politics also reinforce a woman's duty to follow custom. The rise of nationalist parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has seen an equation of patriotism with traditionalism, with members contending that a liberated Indian woman should "fight against the atrocities committed on women, but fight without rebelling or upsetting the family."[46] Nationalist groups in their idolization of Rama have also re-centered Sita, who embodies an ideal of submission in a male-dominated society. Contradictorily, while Indian men worship mythological goddesses as superior, their own wives must accept a position of inferiority in imitating these women.[47] The modern Indian cultural identity has been built around a defense of traditional values, with groups like the BJP constructing their ideology based upon a fear of Westernization's impact on Indian culture. One such effect is the perceived intrusion of Western feminist values such as self-assertion, denigrated by Hindu nationalists as foreign and a result of colonial influence.[48] Accordingly, a woman who puts her own needs first is a woman who is not truly Indian. Such attitudes make it harder for Indian women to voice their pain in the face of trauma. Like Sita, who never voices her suffering through her many tribulations, silent absorption and restraint is valued instead as strength,[49] once again minimizing the presence of women.

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Goel, "Sita's Trousseau," 656.
[47] Barua, "Television, Politics," 224.
[48] Goel, "Sita's Trousseau," 656.
[49] Ibid, 659-660.

OPPOSITIONAL REPRESENTATIONS

Examining Sita's cultural legacy within India shows how the power of mythology has continued to grip the Indian consciousness. Models of domestic and social harmony have long been structured around the ideal of the virtuous woman, who is the guardian of Indian tradition. These standards are also self-reinforcing, as modern Indian women often attempt to fulfill expected roles in an awareness that their achievements outside the domestic sphere will be criticized if they falter as homemakers—perpetuating the traditional model.[50]

Short of removing Sita as an icon, another strategy is needed—recasting and reinterpreting the texts and symbols themselves. Just as there is no authoritative version of the *Ramayana*, there is no hegemonic view of Sita. As Paula Richman positions in her text *Many Ramayanas*, the *Ramayana* tradition "permits endless refashioning of the story, sometimes in actual opposition to the ways in which the story has previously been told."[51] Although the Valmiki *Ramayana* is sometimes treated as the authoritative version, different tellings are not "divergences" but rather expressions of vibrant cultural resources.[52] These diverse *Ramayanas* each reflect the particular cultural and ideological position of those who appropriate it.[53]

Preceding Nalini Malani's paintings of Sita is a long history of other women-centered interpretations of the *Ramayana*, which seek to reclaim the narrative surrounding Sita. Rather than representing Sita as the heroine-victim, there is a rich tradition of regional works, notably women's folk songs, that utilizes her as a vehicle to instead express the women authors' own feelings and experiences.[54] These works disrupt the classical narrative of the *Ramayana* by

[50] Barua, "Television, Politics," 232.
[51] Paula Richman, ed., *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 9, digital file.
[52] Ibid, 7.
[53] Ibid, 4.
[54] Luthra, "Clearing Sacred," 140.

retelling the story from Sita's perspective, placing the blame for her suffering directly on a cruel Rama. Feminist literature and art has continued this work into the present, including American artist Nina Paley's animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* (2009), a more recent Sita-centered critique of the story's gendered politics.

As long as the *Ramayana* continues to be a site of cultural contestation, it remains important for artists like Malani to interrogate dominant ideologies and create a space for feminist elaboration. Invoking and reimagining tradition provides a strategy for Indian feminists to position themselves within a postcolonial context that has disrupted the enunciation of multiple feminisms and isolated Indian women who do not identify as feminists, including women of lower castes, classes, and minority religions.[55] An active engagement with the cultural resources that color the everyday lives of Indians not only makes these resources available for feminist projects, but also "makes visible the selective appropriation of traditional narratives by nationalists and religious fundamentalists."[56]

[55] Ibid, 137.
[56] Ibid.

Chapter 3 – Malani's Sita

An important question that arises when investigating Malani's adoption of Sita is the matter of what prompted her thematic turn to mythology. Although Malani was broadly incorporating Indian themes in her earlier work—themes such as urbanization, colonial history, and social inequality—the decision to utilize Sita, heroine of one of the best-known and most important Indian literary works, marks a turn towards a heightened cultural specificity. With the exception of a separate Medea project in the 1990s, Malani first began incorporating characters from ancient mythology in the ongoing *Stories Retold* series, beginning in 2002 with her first Sita painting (fig. 5).

As in many cultures, mythology in India has the unique ability to communicate with viewers in a universally understood language. In India particularly, mythology can be an effective form of communication given that stories from epics are still regularly performed and read. Beyond performance, however, at an even more fundamental level, religious imagery is essential to Hinduism. The practice of darśana, to see and be seen by the deity through symbolic likenesses, is an everyday act of worship for Hindus and makes religious figures like Sita recognizable at every strata of society. For Malani, these deep associations provide fertile ground "to retell the stories in a new form but also in new configurations."[57] She goes even further and asserts her right, as an artist, to interpret and reinterpret mythological images as her predecessors have done for centuries.[58]

In addition to the power of its universality, mythology is a clear vehicle for Malani to express her key belief in the cyclical nature of human violence. It is notable that Malani's first

[57] Johan Pijnappel, "Nalini Malani: Interview with Nalini Malani from the iCon India Catalogue produced for the Indian show at the 51 Venice Biennale," http://www.nalinimalani.com/texts/venice.htm.
[58] Ibid.

Sita painting was in the same year as the Gujarat riots, the most devastating wave of sectarian violence in India since Partition. Triggered by increasing tensions between Hindus and Muslims, rioting and communal violence killed hundreds and targeted women and children in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing. In the context of these events, Malani's use of mythology can be interpreted as twofold: first, it ultimately suggests "the continued presence of mythic violence in the contemporary world," which Malani is committed to witnessing and registering.[59] Secondly, mythology is an avenue for "[cutting] through the silence that has veiled these horrors accepting violence as part of everyday life."[60] It is a way to acknowledge the suffering of women in a still conservative society where trauma, tradition, and politics have often silenced their experiences. Through mythology as metaphor, Malani begins to unpack this trauma.

SITA PAINTINGS

Sita/Medea (2006) is one of the earlier paintings in Malani's Sita cycle and exemplifies the artist's unique approach to depicting the goddess (fig. 6). Even at first glance, the style and iconography of *Sita/Medea* reveal Malani's dramatic departure from earlier idealized depictions of Sita. In the painting, Malani's Sita is mutated and amorphous, lacking the elegance expected of a semi-divine figure. Her skin is translucent and thin and her body formless, as if a randomly congealed mass rather than a woman. All around her, crude representations of liquified bodies, human remains, organs, and mucous are strewn amongst the watery yellow and red backdrop—eliciting both a sense of organic life and unhealthful decay.[61] While Sita is clothed in this particular rendition, Malani's *Sita II* (2006) from the same year goes even further in depicting Sita nude, splitting open her pelvis to reveal blood and innards spilling out of her genitals (fig.

[59] Andreas Huyssen, "Shadows and Memories: Nalini Malani," in *Nalini Malani: Splitting the Other: Retrospective 1992-2009*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 45.
[60] Ibid, 44.
[61] Srimoyee Mitra, "Naked Bodies as Site of Social Change," *WRECK: The Graduate Journal of Art History, Visual Art & Theory* 2, no. 2 (2008): 72-73.

7). This primal, graphic representation of a Hindu goddess as a violated, female body powerfully expresses the violence and atrocities enacted against women. By transforming the narrative of Sita as an idealized, selfless woman whose chastity is legitimately questioned into one where she is a tragic and mistreated figure, Malani challenges the misogyny of the prevailing interpretation of the *Ramayana*.

In the painting, Malani couples Sita with Medea, a character from Greek mythology. According to Greek myth, Medea is a princess who betrays her own family and people to aid an explorer named Jason in his journey of conquest and exploration, which can be read as a parallel to modern colonialism. After marrying and following her husband into exile, Medea bears Jason two sons. However, after he has an affair with another princess, she murders both Jason's new wife and her own two children in retaliation.[62] Malani's coupling of the two mythological women functions on multiple levels. There are clear parallels between Medea and Sita: both follow their husbands into exile only to be betrayed and both lose their two sons, either literally or metaphorically. Conversely while Sita is idealized for her submission and sacrifice, Medea is reviled for her destruction and anger. To depict the two women in deep conversation suggests Malani's interest in capturing a complex female identity beyond stereotypes. Sita and Medea can be read as potent symbols for not only the gendered biases in Indian and European mythology, but also as representations of the female form as a site of violence. Both stories illustrate desire, betrayal, and violence as basic characteristics of human behavior, contributing to the repetitive violence and social suffering Malani critiques.

In addition, Malani's signature technique of reverse painting contributes to the unstructured, unconventional style of the painting. Like each of the other Sita paintings,

[62] Chaitanya Sambrani, "Apocalypse recalled: the recent work of Nalini Malani," in *Nalini Malani: Stories Retold*, ed. Johan Pijnappel (New York: Bose Pacia, 2004).

Sita/Medea was created with acrylic and enamel on an acrylic sheet using the process of "reverse painting"—an eighteenth century Chinese technique that involves applying layers of paint in reverse, starting with the finishing details, to a clear surface and then flipping it over to reveal the final product.[63] Reverse painting, which Malani has consistently utilized since abandoning oil painting in the 1990s, is a difficult process that does not allow for correction. She uses a brush to create her figures from pools of paint on the surface, contributing to the indistinct quality that distinguishes her work from other more detailed representations of the *Ramayana*.[64] Furthermore, the technique of reverse painting was imported to India by Chinese painters who used it on small glass plates to depict erotic scenes.[65] Later, the process was used in the representation of sacred imagery. It has been appropriated by Malani in her work once again to create "profane" images not in the interest of pornography, but for the purpose of reimagining sacred stories from mythology in a secular context. With her crude representations of Sita, Malani expresses an "everyday suffering" that is "generated by the mistaken belief that sacredness justifies violence."[66]

While *Sita/Medea* represents Malani's early forays into depicting Sita, *Twice Upon a Time* (2014), a massive eleven panel painting replete with both Eastern and Western iconography, is Malani's largest and most ambitious Sita project to date (fig. 8). In *Twice Upon a Time,* Malani focuses more specifically on Sita's story in *Ramayana*, contesting the idealized Sita and Ram espoused by earlier painting and political propaganda. While the title of the work

[63] Shanoor Seervai, "A Retrospective of the Works of Nalini Malani Who Paints in Reverse," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2014, https://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2014/10/10/a-retrospective-of-the-works-of-nalini-malani-who-paints-in-reverse/.
[64] Christine Vial-Kayser, "Nalini Malani, a Global Storyteller," *Studies in Visual Arts and Communication: an international journal* 2, no. 1 (June 2015): 5, http://journalonarts.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/SVACij-Vol2_No1_2015-Vial-Kayser-Nalini-Malani-a-global-storyteller.pdf.
[65] Bal, *In Medias*, 54.
[66] Ibid.

refers to the fairytale ending found in some versions of the *Ramayana*, Malani's piece has distorted to the phrase to instead decry Rama's two separate humiliations of Sita. Using the same process of reverse painting, Sita here is once again mutilated and shapeless. In addition, Malani has positioned her within text that reads "I have no house, only a shadow."[67] This phrase can be understood as referring to India's sexual violence epidemic, in which like Sita, Indian women have been accused of provoking their own assaults and then asked to prove their innocence. Most specifically, Sita's own abduction and abandonment was reflected and replayed in the fate of tens of thousands of Indian women during Partition. Official state policy in the decades after Partition forced women who had been raped and kidnapped to relieve their trauma by demanding their return. These women, who had often made new lives with their abductors, were hurt a second time by their forced retrieval and often put into compromising situations that led to suicide.[68] Sita, then, provides a means for Malani to comment on the suffering of actual women in India, using mythology to rupture the silence and stigma that has shrouded these horrific events.

Furthermore, Malani's depictions of Sita work to extend her message beyond specific historical events in India into a larger, universal narrative of violence against women. Rather than employ a chronological narrative or Western central perspective, Malani utilizes a fragmented, discontinuous narrative in *Twice Upon a Time*, mixing together iconography from disparate times and places to center "as its principal discursive tactic, fragmentation and displacement."[69] Not unlike the multiple perspectives seen in Indian miniature painting or the fragmentation of space in the Ajanta cave paintings, Malani's compositions defy traditional

[67] Museum label, *Twice Upon a Time*, Rivoli, Italy, Castello di Rivoli, 3 January 2019.
[68] Huyssen, "Shadows and Memories," 44.
[69] Bernhard Fibicher, "Splitting the Other: A New Epic Voice," in *Nalini Malani: Splitting the Other: Retrospective 1992-2009*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 10.

perspective and scale in order to suggest meaning beyond the scene.[70] In this case, the chaotic presentation of *Twice Upon a Time* reflects Malani's focus on dispossession, meant to reflect the nation's betrayal of its citizens.

The pairing of Sita with Medea also contests the monocultural status of these images and stories. By including Medea, Malani prevents Western viewers from viewing her work as restricted to Indian women's experiences and instead highlights the violence that has been a hallmark of the female experience across different eras and cultures—ultimately, continuing into the present with sexual violence, Hindu fundamentalist attacks on minority groups, and unresolved conflicts between India and Pakistan. Finally, Malani's use of Western mythology can also be read as a reversal of the colonial claim to elements from other cultures, as she now asserts the colonized subject's right to appropriate in return. Her incorporation of diverse elements is in direct tension with the attempted cultural homogenization of India by the Hindu right, drawing on and promoting the multiculturalism that makes India exceptional in the first place.

DEPARTURE FROM EARLIER DEPICTIONS

To realize the full power of Malani's Sita imagery, her paintings should be contrasted with earlier depictions of the goddess. Just as the *Ramayana* has been depicted for thousands of years, Sita has been represented countless times in art history and in varying styles. One example of an earlier depiction of Sita is a watercolor painting from c.1800 titled *Rama and Sita enthroned in a pavilion, attended by Hanuman*, created by the Rajasthani artist Kama (fig. 9). In this painting, Rama and Sita are seen together in a loving embrace, surrounded by adoring attendants in their lavish court. The painting reflects the happy ending presented in later

[70] Ibid, 8.

retellings of the *Ramayana*, such as the Tulsidas *Ramayana*, which gloss over Sita's mistreatment. Kama depicts Sita as beautiful and romantic, in a manner borrowed from his father, a prolific and well-known artist known as Nainsukh. One of Nainsukh's foremost innovations was his development of a new female face characterized by softness, innocence, and delicacy.[71] Seen in *Rama and Sita enthroned*, this female type became the new ideal over time in the hands of Nainsukh's family. This piece, about ten inches by seven inches, belongs to a long tradition in India of small, carefully crafted miniature paintings. The painting is made with delicate and intricate brushwork and is accented with gold. Its precious quality mirrors the royal scene it depicts.

The major difference between *Rama and Sita enthroned* and Malani's Sita paintings is that the manuscript painting comes from a religious context. Many earlier *Ramayana* images like this were produced by artists working in an elite traditional mode, often craftsmen producing works for royal patrons. Although not all of these artworks were expressly for worship, they were part of a religious context, just as devotional images and temple decoration had been for centuries prior. Malani's images of Sita break from this context because they are instead made in a purely artistic context. This distinction is important because it highlights how Malani has usurped the idea of Sita as a longstanding religious figure to return her status as a mythological and literary figure. By not treating her as a literal figure who existed, like many religious pieces, Malani raises the question with her artworks of why Sita has so much power over Indian women.

A second example, from c. 1980 to the present, is a mass-produced poster by the artist B.G. Sharma. It depicts Sita's trial by fire, featuring the goddess sitting peacefully atop a lit pyre (fig. 10). Sita smiles and prays as she accepts the ordeal, surrounded by Rama and his devotees gazing

[71] B.N. Goswamy, *Nainsukh of Guler: A Great Indian Painter from a Small Hill-State* (n.p.: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1997), 41.

at her in admiration. This image belongs to a genre of Indian art known as "calendar" or "bazaar" art, a style of popular art featuring color reproductions of sacred or decorative motifs.[72] This "kitsch" style saturates India's visual culture; similar images can be found ubiquitously on street posters, sweet boxes, wall paintings, and advertising.[73] Although this example is later, these types of images were first made in the nineteenth century and were influenced by Western techniques such as printmaking, which allowed for the mass proliferation of images. The style is similar to that of European oil painting tradition, moving away from the abstraction more typical of prior Indian religious imagery to emphasize a new naturalism and relatability in the figures. This image, like the manuscript painting, also belongs to a religious context but with a new process and mode of representation. In these bright, cheap lithographic prints, propagated to the mass public, is the sense of a proselytizing or edifying aim. In fact, calendar art images of deities are often used as sacred objects of worship in homes and shrines.

In contrast to these popular images which glorify Sita's submissiveness, Malani has extracted the goddess from the expected context for Indian audiences in order to highlight the violence that has been excluded from her narrative. By placing Sita in an artistic context as a mythological figure rather than a religious or literal figure, Malani relieves some of the pressure on Indian women to emulate Sita's behavior as Sita was not an actual person. Departing from images like the Sharma print, which present acts of violence as events to be celebrated, Malani humanizes Sita by revealing her suffering and contesting the supposed heroism of silenced women. Her abused and mutilated Sita forgoes sacralization, silence, and forbearance to instead articulate obviously the unjust and senseless torture of women, whose real lives now contained

[72] Patricia Uberoi, "Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 17 (April 28, 1990): 46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4396224.
[73] Ibid.

violence of the same magnitude. In Malani's work, we can begin to unearth a new symbolic Sita who serves female rather than male history.

WITHIN A LARGER PRACTICE

Malani's representations of Sita are important ultimately because they serve as an avenue to understand the experiences of Indian women that Malani so urgently seeks to convey. Her depictions of Sita typify a much larger oeuvre of artworks consistently focused on female trauma, chronicling her belief in the cyclical nature of human violence. Her disfigured depictions of Sita, for example, are a logical progression of her earlier *Mutants* series (1994-1996), in which she depicts monstrous female bodies in black dye (fig. 11). These grotesque figures are an early iteration of Malani's signature treatment of human bodies: spilling beyond their outlines, physically disintegrating, and flouting the conventions of gender. The *Mutants* series, initially in response to nuclear testing causing physical deformities in the Marshall Islands, marks Malani's greater intellectual occupation with the female body as a site of "the transaction of pain."[74] In her 1996 essay "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," anthropologist Veena Das uses the example of Partition to explain the dual burden placed on Indian women as both the subject of violence and expected intermediaries of the collective healing process.[75] Das cites testimonies from survivors of Partition to this effect: "What is there to be proud in a woman's body – everyday it is polluted by being consumed," comments one woman.[76] This idea of absorption is key to Malani's portrayals of women. In her paintings, pain and silence physically manifest as disfigurement. Representing "woman as de-gendered mutant, violated

[74] Vial-Kayser, "Nalini Malani," 4.
[75] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (Winter 1996): https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027354.
[76] Ibid, 85.

beyond imagination" personifies the changes that a body undergoes in extreme conditions, sublimating trauma.[77]

These concepts are further developed in the later video work *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (2005). The piece features archival footage from 1947 combined with images from 2002, bringing together two turbulent periods in India's history and challenging idealized views of the country in the face of recurring ethnic violence (fig. 12). On five large screens at an overwhelming and encompassing scale, images representing the birth of the nation fade into scenes of destruction, such as the juxtaposition of Gandhi spinning yarn with images of Muslim houses razed to the ground in Gujarat. Representations of the female body intersperse these scenes, speaking to an association with the generative and destructive nature of nation building.[78] In one scene, a woman is superimposed over a map of India and Pakistan, with borders bisecting her face. This is suggestive of the deep connection between India's birth as a country, and the collective physical and psychological violence enacted against women during Partition, of which accounts of racist and degrading slogans being literally inscribed into the bodies of women highlight the conflation between woman and the nation. This association is echoed by a female voice stating "I died at the border of a new nation carrying a bloody rag as my flag,"[79] referencing both women's ability to create life and the horrific violence that can be enacted against them as a result.

In a sense, Malani's most recent works—immersive installations—seem like a fitting final stage in the long and dynamic evolution of her style and content. *In Search of Vanished*

[77] Whitney Chadwick, "Record/Remember/Relate," in *Nalini Malani: Splitting the Other: Retrospective 1992-2009*, ed. Bernhard Fibicher (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 16.
[78] Museum label, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, Rivoli, Italy, Castello di Rivoli, 3 January 2019.
[79] Ibid.

Blood (2012) is a large-scale installation featuring video images, floating shadows, and sound (fig. 13). In the piece itself, many of same earlier key issues are explored, albeit without Sita. The artwork is centered on female trauma, this time through narration from the Greek character Cassandra, and a chaotic layering of visuals, mirroring the real world without oversimplifying or realistically representing it.[80] Malani's move away from painting and towards video works and installation later in her career and into the present is noteworthy. She argues that an increasing sense of political urgency in her work and in India needed to be mirrored by pieces that moved beyond the frame of painting into the viewer's physical space. With large-scale video projects and shadow play installations like *In Search of Vanished Blood*—created by projecting images onto rotating painted mylar cylinders—Malani felt she was able to introduce a necessary sense of participation for spectators, through which "the viewing gaze and body is fully implicated in a transaction with the artist's provocations."[81]

Ultimately, the diversity of Malani's practice points to her use of Sita as one familiar element within "a larger project in which women's lives are inextricably bound up in the fate of humanity."[82] In her abandonment of traditional modes of representation, Malani instead privileges a wealth of women's voices from the past and present in order to unify her body of work. Looking at her oeuvre, it becomes clear that antithetically to reductive representations of women in India since the colonial period—seized in one iteration or another to push a political message—the lives of women require multiple modes of representation "in which images from a vast archive of historical and cultural sources are appropriated, recycled, cloned, and

[80] Museum label, *In Search of Vanished Blood*, Rivoli, Italy, Castello di Rivoli, 3 January 2019.
[81] Sambrani, "Apocalypse recalled."
[82] Chadwick, "Record/Remember/Relate," 16.

hybridized."[83] Through her interpretation of Sita, Malani—herself an Indian woman—is able to begin the process of reclamation and retrieval.

[83] Ibid.

Chapter 4 – Further Considerations

GLOBALISM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

An interesting consequence of globalism has been Indian artists' presence and renown on the international art stage, even while remaining relatively obscure back home in India. In the past decade, Malani has had solo exhibitions across the world, including in North America, Europe, East Asia, Africa, and Oceania. Since the early 2000s, the vast majority of her solo exhibitions have been abroad rather than in India, though the artist still calls Mumbai home. Her most recent two-part retrospective travelled to Castello di Rivoli in Italy from the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, marking the first retrospective by a contemporary Indian artist at the Pompidou.

One interesting question is the matter of why Malani's art is not well known within India, despite her international acclaim. In general, there is a disconnect between elite art spaces and the broader public audience in India. Although, this tension can also be found in the West, it is dramatic in India, where opportunities for practicing and consuming art are intertwined with the uneven spread of urbanization. This has created fortified art spaces, which flourish on the exclusivity of their audiences and buyers. The explosive growth of the market for Indian art was in large part because of its very containment and novelty. Thus, although many contemporary Indian artists are explicitly committed to practices related to social change—such as Malani, Vivan Sundaram, Bharti Kher, Sheela Gowda, and Pushpamala N.—and create works meant to engage with viewers, their art is not readily available within India. As the market for modern Indian art expands at a disproportionate pace to the growth of public visual literacy, even among

the educated middle class, India has been described as "at times…the least hospitable place to exhibit Indian art."[84]

A lack of engagement might also explain why Malani's radical reinterpretations of religious imagery have not received much criticism within India's highly charged political sphere. In contrast, the artist M.F. Husain, a predecessor and contemporary, was the target of an extensive campaign by Hindu nationalist groups for his depictions of nude Hindu gods and goddesses. In response to these works, fundamentalist groups filed criminal complaints against Husain, attacked his home and vandalized artworks, and eventually caused the artist to leave the country in fear for his life. In another case, Indian religious groups attacked American artist Nina Paley for her animated film *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008), which they viewed as an offensive portrayal of the *Ramayana*. Much like Malani's works, Paley's feminist film highlights what she viewed as Rama's unjust treatment of Sita. Although Malani has faced some criticism for her artworks, it has mostly come from within the male-dominated art community itself and stemmed from a disdain for her early feminist projects.[85] It is unlikely the Indian political climate has become more receptive to artwork like Malani's and more likely that contemporary Indian artists still lack recognition among the general Indian population.

Malani's art, sharply critical of deeply entrenched misogynistic attitudes within Indian culture and state policies, seems as though its primary intended audience is her fellow Indians. Her choice to largely exhibit abroad can appear contradictory to her purported aim of enacting real ideological changes within Indian society. However, Malani's desire to be a global rather than Indian citizen parallels the themes of dispossession found in her artwork and in her personal

[84] Khullar, *Worldly Affiliations*, 230.
[85] Nalini Malani, "Interview: 'Without My Audience, the Art Does Not Come Alive,'" by Noopur Tiwari, *The Wire* (New Delhi, India), October 28, 2017, https://thewire.in/culture/nalini-malani-interview.

life. Having come to India as a refugee during Partition, Malani was forced to contend with loss and alienation from a young age. At one point, she and her family lived in a colony for displaced Sindhis in Mumbai. The combination of traumatic events from her childhood with the reemergence of reactionary Hindu nationalism in the 1990's "grounded her own feeling of being at home in exile."[86] In a society where the dominant conflict is between the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority, Malani is an outsider having been raised by a Sikh mother and a Thesophist, or Christian, father. Her conviction in opposing the redefinition of society in terms of Hinduism can be seen in a recent interview with the Museum of Modern Art, during which she introduces herself by stating "I am Nalini Malani, I am not a Hindu."[87] For these reasons, Malani has always seen herself as "an artist at home in the world" rather than belonging to one culture.[88] This concept is visible in her appropriation of European mythology and characters in her artwork to comment on the universality of female trauma. Reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of her own life and career, Malani has argued that points of reference and ideas are "not confined by man-made borders."[89] Although I have commented on Malani's use of Western iconography as a reversal of the colonial appropriation of other cultures, it also facilitates a cross-cultural exchange in which powerful stories like Medea's are brought to an Indian audience, who can then identify glimmers of similarity in their own national history.

Still, it is clear that contemporary Indian art has a relatability and accessibility problem with the broader Indian public, which must be addressed if artists like Malani intend to use art as an avenue for political and social change. One novel solution to this problem is the artist's use of

[86] Huyssen, "Shadows and Memories," 44.
[87] Stuart Comer, Nalini Malani, and Gayatri Sinha, ""Partition is what we are living even now": A Conversation with Nalini Malani," video file, *post (MoMA)*, June 18, 2015, http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/600-partition-is-what-we-are-living-even-now-a-conversation-with-nalini-malani.
[88] Huyssen, "Shadows and Memories," 44.
[89] Ibid, 43.

the social media platform Instagram. Since May 2018, Malani has been posting original artworks onto the free platform, including animated digital works that combine sketches from her personal notebook with sound and voiceovers. Distinct from how most artists use Instagram—as a means to document works and share exhibition images—Malani's digital pieces are created specifically for the platform and cannot be found elsewhere. While most Indians are excluded from the rarified culture of art galleries, curated exhibitions, and art publications that keeps contemporary Indian art elite within the country, approximately 75 million of them use Instagram. In the present context, Malani's social media directive seems like a promising way to both make contemporary art accessible to the average Indian viewer while still staying true to her commitment to be a transnational artist.

Conclusion

In the context of India's art, political, and religious history, it may actually be more unsurprising than not that Nalini Malani has become one of the preeminent figures of contemporary Indian art. Her art functions as a direct response to what many in the art community view as not only attacks on the freedom of expression by the Hindu right, but an even greater collapse of modernist values in contemporary India.[90] In many ways, Malani's art speaks in the same language of nationalism by incorporating iconography and deeply culturally specific narratives from India's past. However, she refutes it in other ways by referencing material from other cultures and encouraging cultural syncretism—the very antithesis of nationalism. Her use of a well-known figure like Sita, in particular, shows that there are multiple ways to interpret cultural symbols and that interpretations can and should be contested over time. Like with *Sita/Medea*, creating works of art that place Sita in the same category as ancient Greek mythological characters emphasizes the mythology of Sita herself, socially questioning the idea that Sita should be a model for any woman to actually aspire to. Malani's use of mythology outside of India also brings the mythical aspect of Sita to the larger platform of world mythology and imagery, emphasizing that the lessons learned from Sita's story are not exclusive to India.

The ultimate significance of Malani's use of Sita is the extraction of an important character from the past in order to reference cycles of time, cultural memory, and a failure to record past histories. In addressing the repetitive violence of Partition in 1947, the Babri Masjid riots in 1992, and the Gujarat riots in 2002, Malani insists on "the enduring present tense of violence, both in the culture where violence is routine…but also in the timeless trauma it generates."[91]

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[90] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, fault-lines in a national edifice: on the rights and offences of contemporary indian art to *Barefoot across the nation: Maqbool Fida Husain and the idea of India*, ed. Sumathi Ramaswamy (New York: Routledge, 2011), 191.
[91] Bal, *In Medias*, 245.

While the routine occurrence of violence cultivates indifference, acts of witnessing and remembering are necessary for cultural trauma to heal.[92] Malani's artwork is not a tragic look back at the past, but an urgent and outraged reminder that the violence of the past is alive in the present. It extends the story of violence against women into a "continuous and repetitive space of devastation" telling contemporary stories while "citing the mass cultural images that reveal their mythic investments in cultures of violence."[93] Malani's artwork does not indulge in voyeurism or fatalism in the face of this cyclic violence; she seeks to visually render suffering in manner that nurtures and illuminates life.

The artist's interventions are perhaps best summed up by her most recent mythological muse: Cassandra from Greek mythology, a seer who was cursed to give prophecies that were true but that no one believed. She is featured in *In Search of Vanished Blood* (2012), the immersive shadow play work that fills up the final room of Malani's Castello di Rivoli exhibition. In the piece, Cassandra addresses the audience directly, sharing first person accounts of horrific violence. But it is Malani herself who narrates this piece, acting as the voice of Cassandra and perhaps revealing her own identification with the women she depicts. Cassandra in Malani's work seems to capture the crisis of the present—a denial of women's voices and thus an inability to create new realities for the world. In her artwork, Malani ensures that we do not forget what happened to these women, while also creating space for humanity to perhaps finally move on.

[92] Ibid.
[93] Huyssen, "Shadows and Memories," 44.

Figures

Figure 1: Exhibition images of *Nalini Malani: The Rebellion of the Dead. Retrospective 1969-2018. Part II*, 2018. (Castello di Rivoli)

Figure 2: Nalini Malani, *Unity in Diversity*, 2003, video art installation. (Centre Pompidou)

Figure 3: Raja Ravi Varma, *Galaxy of Musicians*, 1889, oil on canvas, Jayachamrajendra Art Gallery, Mysore, Karnataka.

Figure 4: Actor Arun Govil and actress Deepika Chikhalia in “Ramayan” television show, 1987-1988. (*The Indian Express* photo archive)

Figure 5: Nalini Malani, *Sita*, 2002, acrylic and enamel reverse triptych painting on Mylar sheet. (von Drathen, Huyssen, and Chadwick, 2010)

Figure 6: Nalini Malani, *Sita/Medea*, 2006, acrylic, ink, and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet. (von Drathen, Huyssen, and Chadwick, 2010)

Figure 7: Nalini Malani, *Sita II*, 2006, acrylic and enamel reverse painting on Mylar sheet. (von Drathen, Huyssen, and Chadwick, 2010)

Figure 8: Nalini Malani, *Twice Upon a Time*, 2014, detail of eleven-panel polyptych, acrylic, ink, and enamel reverse painting on acrylic sheet. (Kiran Nadar Museum of Art)

Figure 9: Kama, *Rama and Sita enthroned in a pavilion, attended by Hanuman*, c. 1800, opaque watercolor and gold on paper. (Blanton Museum of Art)

Figure 10: B.G. Sharma, *Sita Agni Pravesa*, c. 1980, lithographic print. (Collection of Richard Davis)

Figure 11: Nalini Malani, *Mutani II, B Series*, 1994, fabric dye and chalk on milk-carton paper. (von Drathen, Huyssen, and Chadwick, 2010)

Figure 12: Nalini Malani, *Mother India: Transactions in the Construction of Pain*, 2005, five-channel video play. (von Drathen, Huyssen, and Chadwick, 2010)

Figure 13: Nalini Malani, *In Seach of Vanished Blood*, 2012, video installation and five painted acrylic on Mylar cylinders. (Castello di Rivoli)

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Biography

Keya I. Patel was born in Las Vegas, Nevada on December 16, 1997, and moved with her family to Dallas, Texas in 2005. She enrolled in the Plan II Honors program and double majored in Art History at the University of Texas at Austin in 2015. In college, she curated multiple juried exhibitions as the president of the Undergraduate Art History Association, interned in various state and federal government offices, volunteered with undocumented students and refugees, and spent a summer working at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 2019 and plans to attend Harvard Law School in the fall.